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THE
NPR
INTERVIEWS

◆ EDITED BY ◆

ROBERT SIEGEL

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THE NPR INTERVIEWS 1994

Edited and with an Introduction
by ROBERT SIEGEL



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THE NPR INTERVIEWS

1994

INTRODUCTION

Some mornings when I wake up to NPR and some evenings when I tune in after a day off, I hear one of our interviews as any listener might. It sounds like a fluent and intimate exchange, a spontaneous conversation between a deft interrogator and an insightful respondent. One good interview, and my disbelief in the magic of radio is suspended. As we like to say of our medium, "The pictures are better on radio," and the picture of an interview in the mind's eye is typically a simple, uncluttered scene of two people talking.

Here is a more accurate picture of a good interview and how it becomes part of an NPR program. In the beginning, there is a meeting. Our editors and producers meet often enough to make Rotarians look like loners. Staffs of individual programs meet, led by their producers and editors. Then they all meet together, joined by the "desks" (Washington, national, foreign, science, and cultural). Meetings are occasions for brainstorming, complaining, haggling among programs, and, ultimately, decisions of impeccable wisdom and fairness rendered by the managing editor or the still more august and infallible vice president for news and information programming.

At a typical program staff meeting, any member of the staff might propose an interesting idea for an interview. Someone has noted a brief item on one of the wire services: an inventor has discovered that Tabasco sauce can take the barnacles off a boat. Another has read the compelling work of a Mexican-American poet who was illiterate before entering prison. Another proposes a series of interviews with Muslim, Serb, and Croat refugees from the war in Bosnia. And yet another observes that the New York talk show host Joe Franklin is about to retire and might be coaxed into doing his Billy Crystal impression on national radio. The proposals are adopted, provided

that there is a willing host and a general voice vote or mass mumble in favor, and they are assigned to the true unsung heroes (usually heroines) of broadcasting, the bookers.

Every program at National Public Radio has a booker, who often goes by the formal title editorial assistant. A booker is required to negotiate with publicists for touring authors and aides to politicians, as well as to find and book anyone from an Indiana farmer who teaches llamas how to square-dance to a war correspondent whose newspaper discourages radio interviews. She is heir to a vast collection of phone numbers organized idiosyncratically by past bookers. She has an ear for radio: Is this expert economist sufficiently animated, or too dull to carry four minutes? Is the telephone line from Bujumbura audible, or can we cadge a few minutes from the BBC satellite phone nearby? She knows which cities have studios with high-quality audio lines connecting them to Washington, at what hour Asian bureau chiefs are likely to retire, and which journalists in remote and dangerous places are glad to be on radio, if only their anxious parents in New Jersey are notified in advance of local airtime and the frequency of the nearest NPR station. Some bookers have gone on to jobs producing NPR programs. Others have gone berserk or, worse, gone back to graduate school.

Once the interview is booked, staff involvement starts to proliferate. The host reads everything available about or by the person to be interviewed and consults with the editor of the program about questions to ask. They take up their posts in the studio and control room. Then the engineer sets voice levels and positions microphones to make host and guest sound like equals (without simply suspending mikes smack in front of their faces and achieving the "interview in a banana tree effect"). The host is in the studio, the guest is seated opposite or in a remote studio or on a telephone, the engineer is working the faders of the console, and the editor is in the control room. Then the real worker enters the picture: the cutter.

Cutters enjoy all sorts of titles and occupy many different

ranks in the hierarchy, but when assigned to a story (often an idea they proposed) they all do the same thing: they cut tape. They do to recorded speech and sound what we all now do with the cut and paste functions of a word processor: take out those words, move this paragraph from the end to the middle, use the second version of the Q and A about Billy Crystal instead of the first, tack the end of answer seven onto answer four. In short, make nine rambling minutes recorded in the studio sound like four crisp minutes on the air. No edit may violate the pattern of voice inflections or misrepresent the intended point of a statement by shortening it. And it must all be done fast. A good cutter makes the difference between radio that sounds like it was edited with a knife and fork and radio so plausibly seamless as to suck in the likes of me. Cutters sometimes develop what I think of as Deadline Tourette's Syndrome: as airtime approaches, they shout uncontrollably and blurt obscenities, which is one reason they do their cutting in soundproof booths.

After the interview is cut, there are still more hands whose work influences what we hear on the radio. The producer of the program listens to the cut version and finds that the joke about the Laffer Curve is mystifying unless a line previously cut to get down to three minutes forty-five seconds of tape is restored. The time must come out of another answer.

The director selects music to play after the interview. Picking up on the right mood, and not following every piece on agriculture with banjo plucking or every story on democratization in Latin America with Andean flute music, requires good taste and a fresh ear. Our directors are geniuses at this. They create the wallpaper patterns of sound, the aural background to what we do up front.

The interview that you hear as a result of all these efforts is no casual, spontaneous event. That it often sounds like one is a tribute to the talents of a great many people, all of whose work is reflected in this first annual collection of transcribed NPR interviews. They are drawn from the daily NPR news maga-

zines — *Morning Edition*; *All Things Considered*; *Weekend All Things Considered*; *Weekend Edition, Saturday*; and *Weekend Edition, Sunday* — and were all broadcast in 1993. I selected the interviews after soliciting suggestions from producers as well as poring over rough, printed transcripts. My aim was to collect interviews that read well on the page. This meant excluding nearly all of our music interviews, which depend on hearing the music under discussion. I also wanted to reflect the breadth of subjects we addressed and to convey something of what the year 1993 was like. Thus, the war in Bosnia figures again and again, not only in the chapter devoted to it, "The Story of the Year," but also in the reflections of people who were being interviewed about other subjects, Octavio Paz and Desmond Tutu, for example. It casts a shadow of pessimism over much of what people are saying here about nationalism, war, peace, and brotherhood.

Another theme of 1993 was the inauguration of President Clinton which marked the first change of political party occupying the White House in twelve years. In many of these interviews, the new administration was no doubt the real intended audience. Bosnian Muslims, foreign policy wise men, and advocates of all causes spoke in 1993 with hopes of influencing a government that was just taking (or resisting) shape. Their remarks are about the new administration, as are those of the midwesterners whom Linda Wertheimer interviewed along Route 50, included here in "America Talking."

The NPR Interviews also reflects the year 1993 in terms of our personnel. Scott Simon spent much of the year on leave, working at NBC News. Bob Edwards likewise spent part of the year on leave writing *Fridays with Red: A Radio Friendship*. These absences permitted Neal Conan, Alex Chadwick, and Susan Stamberg to host a great many programs and conduct many excellent interviews, several of which are included. Katie Davis spent an impressive year hosting *Weekend All Things Considered* and performing missionary work for poetry on

radio. Linda Wertheimer, Noah Adams, and I hosted the week-day program. Liane Hansen hosted *Weekend Edition, Sunday*.

While nearly all of these interviews were conducted by hosts, I have included Nina Totenberg's extensive interview with Justice Harry Blackmun, which she conducted with Ted Koppel of ABC's *Nightline*. In addition, while I did not consider for inclusion host conversations with reporters (two-ways, we call them), as they are often too choreographed to qualify as interviews, I have included Susan Stamberg's interview with NPR correspondent Tom Gjelten about the war in Bosnia, which strikes me as a reporter interview of a very different sort.

Although most of the chapters were easily defined and obvious to all, two require some explanation. I set aside a chapter for interviews about "Animal Life," rather than incorporate some into "Science," and others into "America Talking" because of the great amount of time we devote on *All Things Considered* to animal stories. An informal, in-house title for these items, "Critter Corner," suggests that our intent is not entirely high-minded. While I acknowledge there are grounds for skepticism about such a chapter, there is also a good case for it. People have always speculated about their relation to other animal species and tried to determine to what degree animals possess whatever qualities a given age might value in humans: a spine, a soul, a brain, a legal personality.

The chapter titled "Enders" is a grab bag of mostly light interviews that would typically come at the end of a half hour on *All Things Considered*. As different programs organize time differently with segments of different length and rhythm, the items in "Enders" did not actually all come at the end of a program, or a segment. They could have. And they seem to make sense coming at the end of this book.

One of the ironies of editing this collection was confronting as an obstacle what I've always considered a great virtue of

public radio. For years, we have encouraged our staff to write for the ear, not the eye. We have held up fluent, clear, comfortable, and interesting speech as the model for our discourse, rather than the literate, highly punctuated language of the classroom. Making a book out of interviews that were conducted for the ear meant deciding just how offensive to the eye we were prepared to be in the interests of authenticity. The decision was to smooth out and sweeten, but not rewrite. My standard for verisimilitude was that the written versions would be a less exact transcription of the original tapes than a court reporter would make, more exact than if we were to render them into literate text, and closer to a playwright's script than to either of those extremes. I routinely corrected repetitions, omissions, and errors of grammar. I have also shamelessly changed to "yes" the many sounds of affirmation uttered by hosts and guests alike which approximate it (yep, yea, yeah, etc.) and which I deemed too painful for the eye to endure. Apart from such alterations, I believe this collection maintains one of NPR's knacks for recording and presenting the people of this country and the world, speaking as they do, without homogenizing them into a bland and predictable broadcast dialect of English.

The idea of an NPR publishing project that would benefit, in part, the NPR News Excellence Fund originated with John Dinges. Mary Morgan, NPR's very gifted director of promotion and public affairs, saw it through with the assistance of Gail Ross of Lichtman, Trister, Singer and Ross. At Houghton Mifflin, John Sterling proposed the idea of an annual collection of interviews and, with Janet Silver, turned an untested idea into a book. Jayne Yaffe brought such literacy and thoroughness to the task of editing the manuscript that I do not know whether I am more proud to count her as my editor or as a listener.

At NPR, Ori Hoffer provided computer expertise, and Necola Deskins-Staples, administrative support. Above all, I am forever indebted to Julia Redpath, whose good judgment and tireless dedication are evident to me on every page. If *The NPR*

Interviews is to survive as an annual project, it will be due largely to her enterprise in researching and assembling this first effort. Thanks as well to Jane, Erica, and Leah Siegel for putting up with my demands for time on the computer and my crankiness over deadlines of all sorts.

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ARTS AND LETTERS

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The seventy-year-old portrait photographer RICHARD AVEDON, now a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, speaks with Susan Stamberg about his photography, his life, and his "autobiography," *In Pictures*.
October 9, 1993

STAMBERG: I think we need to start with the physical size of this book. Which weighs more? This book or your eight-by-ten Deardorff view camera on a wooden tripod?

AVEDON: I'd be reluctant to carry either of them anywhere.
OK.

STAMBERG: It's big, 284 black-and-white photographs and very few words. You call it an autobiography. You don't arrange it chronologically, but it does include the first photograph you ever took in 1931-32. Describe it to us.

AVEDON: I think there are two in the same year. One of my sister and my mother when I was nine, with the Eastman Kodak box Brownie. My father was a teacher before he became a businessman. He loved to teach me everything he could, and so the principles of photography were the first things. He showed the way in which light burned by using the drapes and how they would bleach, how a light-sensitive surface became a negative and then became a print, as he explained it. Since my sister, being the beauty of the family, was photographed by all of us and by me all the time. We photographed Louise with parasols and in clown costumes and standing in the sunshine, and I thought, Well, skin is light-sensitive and skin gets tan, so I took a negative of Louise and pasted it onto my shoulder and went out to the beach. The next morning I peeled it off and there was my sister on my shoulder. She later died in a mental institution. I think her beauty had something to do with that. It's kind of an isolating experience.